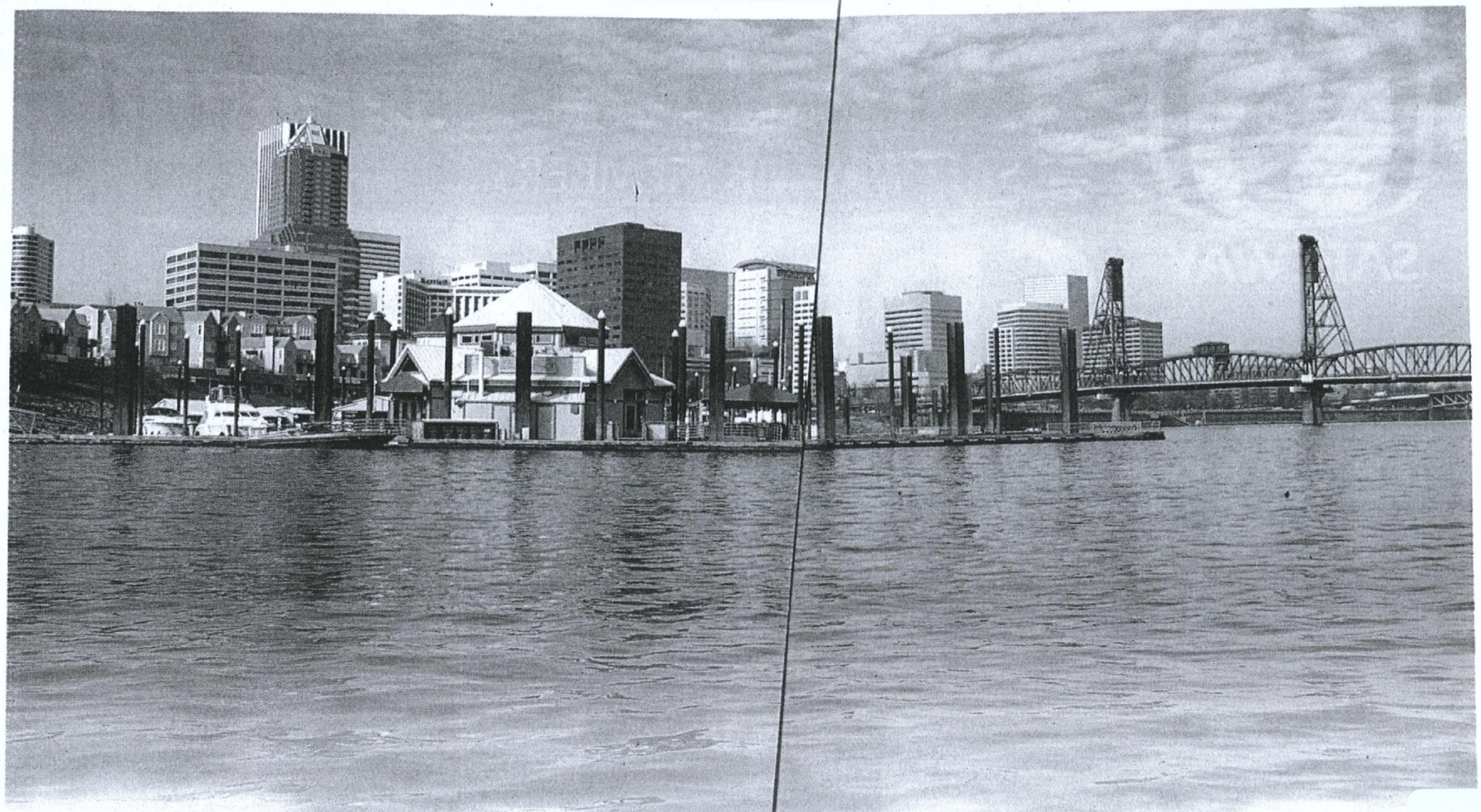

Legal pollutants foul river

Experts want urban dwellers to think twice when using such things as everyday garden products

BY BEN JACKLET
The Tribune

With three terse phrases, Karen Lewotsky sums up the garden section of a well-stocked Portland megamart. "Slug and snail," she says, pointing. "Make it grow faster. Kill it."

On the bottom shelf, a 10-pound bag of the bug killer diazinon is selling for $8.69. Three feet away are packages of the pesticide Dursban. Both products were banned by the Environmental Protection Agency last year but have not yet been pulled from market shelves.

Across the aisle, a moss killer for soggy roofs carries a warning in fine print:

fish runs, and it's a complicated task.

More than 90 percent of the Willamette Valley's wetlands are gone. U.S. Geological Survey studies have found residues from 50 different pesticides in the Willamette River. Three billion gallons of combined sewer and storm water from Portland alone spill into the river annually. Once plentiful king salmon and steelhead trout are now listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Each time it rains in Portland, water pours off roofs, down driveways, across oily streets and parking lots, through city storm drains and into the river. This water collects and carries large amounts of pesticides and lawn fertilizers, as well as motor oil, antifreeze, paint chips and more.

This means that a significant portion of the mess in the Willamette can be attributed not to big corporations or factople, they would like to force stores to report all sales of pesticides by category and amount sold each month.

A section of a pesticides "right to know" law, signed by Gov. John Kitzhaber in September of 1999, calls for a system to track pesticides bought for home use. The law needs to be implemented by next January, and an 18-member work group is arguing over the details.

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Laura Weiss, a Lewotsky colleague, is the environmental council's program director for toxics and pesticides, and she believes that sales reporting could reveal some important information and help raise public awareness. Weiss is in the garden section, studying labels. "This stuff was probably made from some form of industrial waste is my guess," she says.

The labels on products are sometimes sparse and vague — and sometimes starkly clear. A de-icer for car windshields carries a warning that its ingredients "cannot be made non-poi-

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Across the aisle, a moss killer for soggy roofs carries a warning in fine print: "This product is toxic to fish." And a box of slug poison has two seemingly contradictory messages: "ideal for vegetable gardens" but "may be fatal to dogs."

For now, all of these products are perfectly legal and fill specific consumer demands. But Lewotsky, the director of water programs for the Oregon Environmental Council, shakes her head as she surveys them. Her job is to help restore the polluted Willamette River and its threatened fish runs, and it's a complicated task.

More than 90 percent of the Willamette Valley's wetlands are gone. U.S. Geological Survey studies have found residues from 50 different pesticides in the Willamette River. Three billion gallons of combined sewer and storm water from Portland alone spill into the river annually. Once plentiful king salmon and steelhead trout are now listed under the Endangered Species Act. The Portland harbor has been named a Superfund site.

And then there is your basic everyday pollution. The primary source of contamination in the Willamette, up to 75 percent by some estimates, is "runoff"— water carrying contaminants, flowing downhill into streams or storm drains and eventually into the river.

In rural areas, runoff can carry fertilizers and pesticides from farmland. While farmers use more total pesticides than homeowners, they use less per acre.

Each time it rains in Portland, water pours off roofs, down driveways, across oily streets and parking lots, through city storm drains and into the river. This water collects and carries large amounts of pesticides and lawn fertilizers, as well as motor oil, antifreeze, paint chips and more.

This means that a significant portion of the mess in the Willamette can be attributed not to big corporations or factories or farms but to average city people, using legally purchased products in the home, the garden and the driveway.

Lewotsky and other environmentalists want to quantify this form of urban pollution and to reduce it. They are addressing the problem through public education, with public service announcements and brochures such as the environmental council's "50 Ways to Love Your River."

They also are trying to approach the problem through legislation. For example, they would like to force stores to report all sales of pesticides by category and amount sold each month.

A section of a pesticides "right to know" law, signed by Gov. John Kitzhaber in September of 1999, calls for a system to track pesticides bought for home use. The law needs to be implemented by next January, and an 18-member work group is arguing over the details.

Environmentalists support sales reporting to keep track of how much of the stuff is sold and where.

Retail businesses argue that sales amounts are private information. "We would need a guarantee that our sales information would not be made public, that it would not be on public records or broken out in any way," says Fred Meyer spokesman Rob Boley.

Boley confirms that Fred Meyer is able to track sales item by item and store by store. "But that won't tell you how it's being used, or where, or how much, or in what time frame."

Laura Weiss, a Lewotsky colleague, is the environmental council's program director for toxics and pesticides, and she believes that sales reporting could reveal some important information and help raise public awareness. Weiss is in the garden section, studying labels. "This stuff was probably made from some form of industrial waste is my guess," she says.

The labels on products are sometimes sparse and vague — and sometimes starkly clear. A de-icer for car windshields carries a warning that its ingredients "cannot be made non-poisonous." A bottle of antifreeze with ethylene glycol "causes birth defects in laboratory animals."

Lewotsky notes, "If a business were to discharge this stuff, they would need a wastewater permit. But your average citizen doesn't. And if everybody in Portland is using these products without thinking twice, we're talking about a huge cumulative effect."

Contact Ben Jacklet at bjacklet@portlandtribune.com.

What you can do to help the Willamette

As much as 75 percent of the pollution in the Willamette River comes from "runoff" — water flowing downhill, carrying contaminants into storm-water drains and eventually the river.

Here are some ways you can help decrease the amount of polluted runoff into the Willamette.

■ Disconnect your downspouts. Let the water falling off your roof soak into your lawn. Otherwise it will add to a combined sewage system that floods into the Willamette when it rains. Call Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services, 503-823-5858.

■ Know your bugs. Encourage the beneficial insects and trap the nasty ones. Wiping out every last garden critter with chemicals is not the only way. Check Metro's suggested alternatives to pesticides on the Web at

of used motor oil can pollute one million gallons of fresh water.

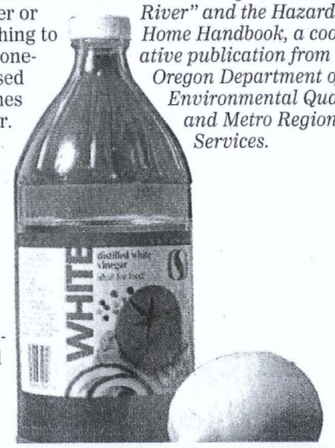
■ Buy that slug a beer. If you really need to kill a slug, drown it in beer. Leave an open bottle well-secured in the garden, and the slug will be attracted to the liquid and crawl inside and drown.

■ Drive your car up on the lawn when you wash it. This will prevent oil and soap (both of which harm fish) from running directly down into the storm drains and potentially

and a bit of lemon juice, and it will clean the grimiest window or headlight. A warning, though: never mix vinegar with bleach, as this can cause toxic vapors.

■ Give your ears a break. If you're a two-stroke boater or jet-skier, consider switching to a four-stroke. Roughly one-quarter of the fuel used by two-stroke engines ends up in the river.

■ Reconsider moss. Rather than wiping out the moss on your roof, let it be. Consider the words of Mike Houck, urban naturalist for the Portland chapter of the Audubon Society: "What could possibly create a sense of anticipation for another



a new book edited by Houck and M.J. Cody.

– *Ben Jacklet*

Sources: Oregon Environmental Council's "50 ways to Love Your River" and the Hazardless Home Handbook, a cooperative publication from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and Metro Regional Services.